

The Wright Family

The story of the first powered flight is incomplete without a few words about the remarkable Wright family, for in many ways the Wright Flyer was a family project. First of all the two brothers were both so deeply involved in it that much of the world thinks of them only jointly. Furthermore the project had the blessings of the father, a remarkable bishop and teacher himself; the sum of \$ 1000 he gave to Wilbur and Orville was used as a corpus fund by the brothers, who drew on its interest and on their own other resources for their expenditure on the project. Then there was their very intelligent sister Katherine, the only graduate in the family, who not only tended house after the mother passed away (when only 36) but gave intense and warm support to the brothers and kept worrying herself about their progress.

Wilbur and Orville owned their toys jointly. Among the gifts the boys got from their father was a helicopter driven by a rubber band, of a kind still seen but made first by the French engineer Alphonse Penaud (the principle going back to another famous engineer and artist, Leonardo da Vinci). This toy set the boys thinking about flight.

Although the brothers both made the most significant contributions to the development of the Wright Flyer, their temperaments were very different and fortunately complementary. Wilbur read widely, had ambitions of going to college, wanted to be a teacher, was scientific in outlook by unerring instinct, loved doing research, wrote his letters and papers carefully, was critical and systematic in everything he did, never lost his cool, was willing to bide his time patiently – imperturbable, friendly, polite, proud. Orville was not enthusiastic about continuing in school, was technologically inventive and ingenious in making and fixing things, happy running a printing press or a cycle shop, shrewd as a businessman with a good eye for how best to make money. Both of them were smart in their own ways. Both were also shy in their own ways: they remained life-long bachelors. (Wilbur

said he had no time for both wife and plane.) Both dressed well (but Orville more smartly), and made their Kitty Hawk tests always wearing collar and tie. They avoided alcohol. They argued vehemently with each other – ‘hot but not mad’, said an observer who was present during one of their technical discussions; he also noted that after a while (when the logic of the brother’s position became evident), they would switch sides, and continue to argue vehemently defending their new position!

The two clearly formed an outstanding team. But the team had an invisible member as well: sister Katherine was particularly close to Orville, and was (according to Crouch) his ‘staunchest defender, . . . strongest supporter, . . . best friend’. She ‘paid a considerable physical and psychological price [for her support to father and brothers]. It was her most important and least recognized contribution to the work of the Wright brothers’. She was apparently interested in no other men, and married only when she was 52 – less than three years before her death. The marriage appears to have shattered Orville, who then cut off all his relations with her.

The father, Milton Wright, was a principled and (perhaps in consequence) controversial bishop. As his distinguished sons never even graduated from high school, he must have been responsible for their informal education, especially Wilbur’s. Wilbur read extensively from his father’s library, and appears to have learnt from him a critical and independent attitude. The controversies surrounding Milton’s career were a result of his uncompromising opposition to slavery, rum traffic, secret societies etc., and his commitment to moral reform. He encouraged his sons fully, and wrote in his diary, on Wilbur’s death:

A short life, full of consequences. An un-failing intellect, imperturbable temper, great self-reliance and as great modesty, seeing the right clearly, pursuing it steadfastly, he lived and died.

The Wrights were a remarkable family.

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